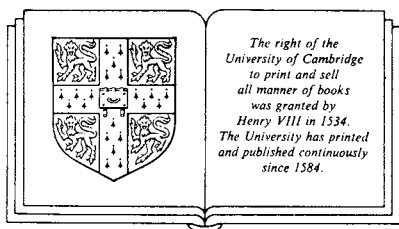


# THE AFRICAN POOR

A history

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# 1

## The comparative history of the poor

There are three reasons for writing a book on this subject. One is that poverty is growing today in sub-Saharan Africa, terribly in the form of mass famine and insidiously in the declining living standards of remote villages and urban shanty towns. Contemporary poverty has become an important subject of research, notably in Nigeria,<sup>1</sup> in the numerous country studies sponsored by the International Labour Office and the World Bank,<sup>2</sup> and in the massive Carnegie Inquiry into poverty and development in southern Africa.<sup>3</sup> The hope that research and practical thought about poverty may benefit from a historical perspective is one reason for this first attempt to provide one.

A second reason for writing the book is a belief that Africa's splendour lies in its suffering. The heroism of African history is to be found not in the deeds of kings but in the struggles of ordinary people against the forces of nature and the cruelty of men. Likewise, the most noble European activities in Africa have been by those – often now almost forgotten – who have cared for the sick and starving and homeless.

The third reason is academic. The old imperial history was marred by an elitism which, because the elite was often a tiny white minority, could degenerate further into racialism. The national histories that have replaced it, by contrast, are marred by their parochialism. To escape both defects requires a comparative social history which treats peoples on a basis of equality rather than subjection. The history of the poor permits an experiment on these lines. Historians of Africa have much to learn from recent work on the history of poverty in Europe. They can also draw something from parallel work in other continents, although this is more fragmentary. In particular, European historians have identified major questions about the poor which need to be asked in Africa: their identity, numbers, characteristics, and location; the reasons for their poverty; what they thought and did about it; and what the larger society thought and did about them.

Yet a comparative history of the African poor must first surmount three obstacles. One is to find a usable definition of poverty. This could be discussed at great length, debating the advantages of analysing absolute

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poverty (measured against the minimum necessary to maintain a person's physical efficiency) or relative poverty (measured against the average living standards of a particular society).<sup>4</sup> Yet beyond showing that the superiority once attributed to the notion of relative poverty is no longer obvious,<sup>5</sup> such a discussion would have little value for the history of Africa because both definitions rely on measurements which were not made there until the 1930s. For earlier periods the historian must rely largely upon descriptions of behaviour which either the describer or the historian identifies as indicating poverty. Moreover, the poor are diverse, poverty has many facets, and African peoples had their own varied and changing notions of it. A precise and consistent definition is not feasible. Nevertheless, poverty has an inescapable connotation of physical want, especially in poor countries. Examination of the sources suggests that two levels of want have existed in Africa for several centuries. On one level have been the very large numbers – perhaps most Africans at most times – obliged to struggle continuously to preserve themselves and their dependants from physical want. These will be called the poor. On another level have been smaller numbers who have permanently or temporarily failed in that struggle and have fallen into physical want. These will be called the very poor or destitute. Of course, there was no sharp dividing line between them. Yet the distinction has cross-cultural validity. It existed in ancient Greece.<sup>6</sup> It was identified by Charles Booth's pioneer study of London during the 1880s, which defined the poor as those 'living under a struggle to obtain the necessities of life and make both ends meet' and the very poor as those who 'live in a state of chronic want'.<sup>7</sup> The distinction between *pauvre* and *indigent* was drawn in early modern France, where 'Both *pauvre* and *indigent* knew hunger, but the *indigent* were never free from it.'<sup>8</sup> In Africa the distinction existed in some, but not all, pre-colonial languages<sup>9</sup> and has appeared frequently since, most recently in accounts of South African resettlement sites during the early 1980s.<sup>10</sup> Because a history of the African poor in the wider sense would be almost a history of Africa, this book is chiefly about the very poor, but it is also about the circumstances in which the ordinarily poor became very poor, either temporarily or permanently.

The second obstacle facing a history of African poverty is the inadequacy of the sources. This is true in any continent: the poor leave only sporadic traces in the record. In Africa the problem is doubly difficult because literacy was rare until modern times. The impressions of poverty to be gathered from oral traditions and from generalised descriptions by foreign observers can be seriously misleading.<sup>11</sup> More reliable are the incidental references to the poor in contemporary or near-contemporary records: Ethiopian hagiographies, Islamic chronicles, missionary letters, travellers' journals, anthropologists' observations, administrators' reports. The list looks impressive and sources for the social history even of the poor are richer in Africa than is often realised, but the subject can be studied seriously only where written sources survive. Moreover, Africa character-

istically lacked the charitable institutions whose records have provided much material for the history of poverty in Europe. It happens, too, that this book has been written under circumstances which have made it difficult to study unpublished sources surviving in Africa. It rests largely on published sources and certain documents available in Europe. For this and other reasons, it attempts only to rough out a subject for further study.

The third obstacle to this project is the widespread belief that until recently there were no poor in Africa, because economic differentiation was slight, resources were freely available, and the 'extended family' supported its less fortunate members. Only with the coming of colonial rule, market economies, and urbanisation, so it is often claimed, did things begin to fall apart. This 'myth of Merrie Africa'<sup>12</sup> was widely held during the colonial period. 'The rules and regulations of every African Community leave no ground for idle women, prostitutes or vagabonds, and create no possibility for the existence of waifs and strays', a Lagos newspaper explained in 1913. 'No Barnado's Homes, no Refuge for the Destitute grace the cities; because the conditions producing them are absent.'<sup>13</sup> Black South Africans often agreed:

There were no poor and rich; the haves helped those who were in want. No man starved because he had no food; no child cried for milk because its parents did not have milk cows; no orphan and old person starved because there was nobody to look after them. No, these things were unknown in ancient Bantu society.<sup>14</sup>

White South Africans, colonial officials, and anthropologists widely accepted this view and transmitted it to nationalist intellectuals and international agencies. The United Nations Regional Adviser on Social Welfare Policy and Training, Economic Commission for Africa, explained in 1972:

In rural Africa, the extended family and the clan assume the responsibility for all services for their members, whether social or economic. People live in closely organized groups and willingly accept communal obligations for mutual support. Individuals satisfy their need for social and economic security merely by being attached to one of these groups. The sick, the aged and children are all cared for by the extended family. In this type of community, nobody can be labelled as poor because the group usually shares what they have. There is no competition, no insecurity, no big ambitions, no unemployment and thus people are mentally healthy. Deviation or abnormal behaviour is almost absent.<sup>15</sup>

When expressed in so simplistic a form, this view of the African past or present is scarcely worth refuting. Yet there is a more penetrating claim that poverty existed but was relatively rare in pre-colonial Africa. The most important statement is Professor Jack Goody's attempt to isolate the main differences between African societies and those of pre-industrial Europe and Asia. Generally, so he has argued, Africa lacked stratified classes with distinct subcultures, because it lacked the plough, intensive agriculture,

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literacy, and world religions, but possessed ample land and practised exogamous polygyny.<sup>16</sup> Since 'poverty ... implies the opposite, riches, in the same way that slavery implies freedom',<sup>17</sup> poverty was generally absent from these unstratified societies, along with such ancillary phenomena as asceticism, religious charity, and systematic begging.<sup>18</sup> Only those exceptional regions – notably Ethiopia and perhaps the Central Sudan – which did have intensive agriculture, literacy, and world religions also possessed stratified subcultures and, by implication, conditions breeding numerous poor.<sup>19</sup> This book neither challenges Goody's general analysis of Africa's distinctiveness nor disputes that both differentiation and poverty were especially overt in Ethiopia and the Central Sudan. Rather, it argues that in normal circumstances the forms of poverty existing there had little to do with technology, landownership, intensive agriculture, or even (in a direct sense) the pattern of social stratification, although these did affect the behaviour of the poor. The point is that the nature and causes of poverty in pre-colonial Africa – and indeed most of Africa to this day – were not those implied either by Goody's analysis or by those of historians who have written on the subject.<sup>20</sup> This explains why very poor people existed widely in pre-colonial Africa, not only in Ethiopia and the Central Sudan. It also explains the manner in which poverty has changed in Africa during the twentieth century.

In order to introduce this argument and the main themes in the history of the African poor it is useful to compare their experience with that of the poor in Europe and other continents. Two initial distinctions are valuable. One is Dr Gutton's dichotomy of structural poverty, which is the long-term poverty of individuals due to their personal or social circumstances, and conjunctural poverty, which is the temporary poverty into which ordinarily self-sufficient people may be thrown by crisis.<sup>21</sup> The second distinction is between the structural poverty characteristic of societies with relatively ample resources, especially land, and that characteristic of societies where such resources are scarce. In land-rich societies the very poor are characteristically those who lack access to the labour needed to exploit land – both their own labour (perhaps because they are incapacitated, elderly, or young) and the labour of others (because they are bereft of family or other support). In land-scarce societies the very poor continue to include such people but also include those among the able-bodied who lack access to land (or other resources) and are unable to sell their labour power at a price sufficient to meet their minimum needs. The history of the structural poor in Western Europe during the medieval and early modern periods turns on this distinction. Until perhaps the twelfth century Europe was a land-rich continent which nevertheless contained many structural poor, who were predominantly the weak, especially those bereft of labour. 'The poor of North Italy, in the tenth century', it has been written, 'are the unfortunate, the disinherited, "widows, orphans, captives, the defeated, the infirm, blind, crippled, feeble"'. There is no poor class but men in a situation of

poverty.<sup>22</sup> Landless labourers with varying degrees of freedom certainly existed in many areas, but they were generally absorbed into the labour-hungry rural economy.<sup>23</sup> During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, by contrast, Western Europe's growing population pressed upon the available land in many regions. To the incapacitated poor were added men who lacked viable landholdings and could not sell their labour.<sup>24</sup> Many migrated to towns, where by the early fourteenth century wages were so low that even men in regular employment might not be able to support themselves and their families.<sup>25</sup>

During the fourteenth century Europe's population declined again and the pressure on resources eased. Two centuries later, however, demographic growth once more transformed the pattern of poverty. In England, for example,

In the villages and towns of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, poverty had not been regarded as a major social problem. It was limited in extent and generally the result of particular misfortune – the death of a spouse or parent, sickness or injury – or else a phase in the life cycle, notably youth or old age . . . By the end of the sixteenth century and still more by the mid seventeenth century, the poor were no longer the destitute victims of misfortune or old age, but a substantial proportion of the population living in constant danger of destitution, many of them full-time wage labourers. In both town and country a permanent proletariat had emerged, collectively designated 'the poor'.<sup>26</sup>

In later eighteenth-century France, similarly, the incapacitated still formed a large proportion of the poor, but observers were more concerned by the poverty of the able-bodied who lacked land, work, or wages adequate to support the dependants who were partly responsible for their poverty. Whereas in early medieval Europe the most common beggar had been aged or blind, in later eighteenth-century France, by one account, the most common beggar was a child.<sup>27</sup>

This transition from land-rich to land-scarce poverty has taken place in other continents. Most poverty in Asia today is due to land shortage, unemployment, and low wages. Poverty in India is closely associated with large families.<sup>28</sup> Only in Europe, however, has the history of the transition been written systematically. This book is a first attempt to chart it in Africa. It argues that the structural poor of pre-colonial Africa were mainly those lacking access to labour. Because poverty took this form, attempts to relate it to landholding systems, agricultural technology, or world religions have little relevance. Historical record of those lacking labour in pre-colonial societies is uneven, partly because vulnerability to misfortune varied with time and place, partly because mechanisms to prevent such unfortunates from falling into extreme poverty varied, and partly because the availability of sources is uneven. Yet the structural poor of this kind appear to have been numerous everywhere. They appear most frequently in folktales, which often identified a category of weak individuals – the old, the hand-



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icapped, and the very young – who lived in destitution but triumphed over the strong, usually by magical means. To help such unfortunates might bring praise and fortune to the helper.<sup>29</sup>

By contrast, structural poverty resulting from land scarcity appeared only slowly in Africa. This gave the history of poverty there its special character when compared with Europe or Asia. That Africa was a land-rich continent is a commonplace of African studies, but its implications for the poor have been overlooked. Although historians have claimed that certain pre-colonial rulers used political power to deprive subjects of access to land, thereby reducing them to poverty, the sources for these claims are questionable. There is stronger evidence for landlessness due to personal misfortune and for poverty resulting from lack of cattle in societies heavily dependent upon them. Extensive landlessness first emerged in South Africa during the eighteenth century. In colonial Africa it was limited to certain areas of ruthless alienation or unusual population density. Both there and in the south, however, land scarcity was slow to breed extreme poverty because many of the landless could sell their labour at wages which at least ensured subsistence. Only slowly during the twentieth century did Africa – and chiefly southern Africa – see numerous able-bodied men lacking land, work, or wages sufficient to maintain physical efficiency. Only slowly did possession of a family, rather than lack of one, become a cause of structural poverty. By the 1980s southern Africa had certainly entered a resource crisis as acute as that of thirteenth-century Europe. Even there, however, the new poor had only been added to the older category of incapacitated and unprotected. Structural poverty has been a cumulative phenomenon which has displayed the same continuity over long periods as in Europe.<sup>30</sup>

Conjunctural poverty, by contrast, has exhibited greater change. In pre-colonial Africa, as in Europe until the seventeenth century, the chief cause of conjunctural poverty was climatic and political insecurity which might culminate in mass famine mortality. It was at these moments that resources were acutely scarce and exclusion from them by political or other means became the chief determinant of poverty. With time, however, these crises grew less common. In England the last famine to cause mass deaths occurred in 1623, in France early in the eighteenth century.<sup>31</sup> Devastating famine mortality generally disappeared from Western Europe during the 1740s, from India (with one exception) at the beginning of the twentieth century, and from China somewhat later in this century.<sup>32</sup> It was not that food shortages ceased, but that they ceased to kill great numbers. This book argues that twentieth-century Africa experienced a similar change in conjunctural poverty, although unevenly and incompletely.<sup>33</sup> The chief reasons for it were broad increases in wealth, diversified sources of income, more effective government, better transport, wider markets, and improved hygiene and medicine.<sup>34</sup> The cost, in Africa as at times elsewhere, was that epidemic starvation for all but the rich gave way to endemic undernutrition for the very poor.<sup>35</sup> Conjunctural and structural poverty converged.

As in understanding the nature of poverty, so in studying the means by which the poor survived, much is to be learned from historians of Europe and Asia. They have emphasised four means of survival. Their sources have attracted them especially to institutions which the wider society created either to care for the poor, to confine them, or to help them escape from poverty – in Europe the history of institutions broadly followed that sequence.<sup>36</sup> Informal and individual charity offered a second means of survival.<sup>37</sup> A third was organisation by the poor themselves, either by under-world groupings<sup>38</sup> or by the Untouchable communities which characterised Asian poverty.<sup>39</sup> Finally, historians have stressed that the poor relied less on institutions or organisations than on their own efforts, 'devious, ugly, cruel, and dishonest as these might be'.<sup>40</sup>

These means of survival existed also in Africa, but the balance among them differed. A scarcity of formal institutions characterised poverty there. Even where they existed, as in Ethiopia and the Islamic regions of West Africa, they were secondary to an individual charity attuned to the personalised character of mobile, colonising societies. Where institutional provision existed outside Christian or Islamic influence, it often sought to conceal the poverty of beneficiaries. The scarcity of institutions not only makes the history of charity difficult to recover in Africa but also meant that Africans had, and often still have, much hostility to institutional care for the poor. Informal benevolence, on the other hand, did flourish in some societies little touched by Islam or Christianity, implying indigenous evolution of the idea that the poor merited special sympathy – a notion virtually absent from Greece or Rome.<sup>41</sup> Organisations created by the very poor were rare in pre-colonial Africa and in the twentieth-century countryside, although more common in modern towns. Although stigmatised groups of untouchables are often held to be associated with world religions,<sup>42</sup> they existed in several parts of Africa but were a far smaller proportion of the poor than were the Untouchables of India or Japan.<sup>43</sup>

Given the scarcity of institutions and organisations, the African poor sought their survival in two directions. One was the family. Although much nonsense has been written about African families as universal providers of limitless generosity, it is nevertheless true that families were and are the main sources of support for the African poor, as much for the young unemployed of modern cities as for the orphans of the past. In several African languages the common word for 'poor' – *umphawi* in the Chewa language of modern Malawi, for example – implies lack of kin and friends,<sup>44</sup> while the weak household, bereft of able-bodied male labour, has probably been the most common source of poverty throughout Africa's recoverable history. Equally important, however, is the fact that Africans lived in different kinds of families, from the Yoruba compound with scores of related residents to the elementary households of Buganda. Each kind of family had its particular points of weakness and exuded its particular categories of unsupported poor – orphans in one case, barren women in another, childless

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elders in a third. Moreover, family structure was not an immutable ethnic characteristic but could change to meet changing needs. The intimate connection between poverty and family structure has been neglected by historians of Europe and may be Africa's chief contribution to the comparative history of the poor.

Yet in another respect the African and European poor were entirely at one. Both relied for their survival chiefly on their own efforts. Like pre-industrial Europe, Africa was and is a harsh world for the weak. By protecting themselves from famine, by exploiting the resources of the bush, by hawking or begging or stealing, by endurance or industry or guile, by the resourcefulness of the blind or the courage of the cripple, by the ambition of the young or the patience of the old – by all these means the African poor survived in their harsh world. These are their inheritance amidst the harshness of the present.